

# Citizens' Efficiency Commission Recommendation: Fire and EMS Functions in Sangamon County



## Executive Summary

In the course of its research, the CEC received evidence that fire and EMS response merited attention in the region. The CEC examined the regional allocation of resources related to these functions, data related to response times, and mechanisms for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response. **The CEC has learned that concerns exist related to high costs of fire/EMS services in some areas and lack of volunteer responsiveness in others. It has endeavored to develop a recommendation that comprehensively addresses the nuanced concerns related to urban and rural areas of the region.**

### Overview of Existing Services

- Fire protection in the region is costly as compared to services provided in peer counties. In addition to the City of Springfield's paid Fire Department (SFD), twenty-nine volunteer fire protection districts (FPDs) are responsible for fire service in the county. These districts vary considerably in terms of size, capacity, and responsiveness.
- The CEC considers geographical proximity, quality personnel, and equipment capacity as the three critical components in providing adequate fire and EMS coverage. There is considerable geographic overlap in the driving ranges of existing fire houses, which were established to meet rural needs prior to improvements in the existing road network.
- Most calls in the region are now EMS-related, rather than fire-related.
- In spite of geographic proximity, while ambulance transport in Sangamon County appears to occur within a timeframe comparable to industry standards, **response times in rural fire protection districts vary, and some rural districts have struggled to maintain volunteer forces with the capacity needed to respond to calls in a timely fashion**, particularly during daytime hours.
- Personnel capacity appears to be the primary concern for these districts, as opposed to equipment needs. Training requirements and rural depopulation are likely the primary factors contributing to this trend.

The CEC was able to acquire geographically-based data related to FPD incident responses that has not previously been analyzed. Data suggests that revenues and costs may not be allocated equitably under the current arrangement.

- Substantial extra-jurisdictional responsiveness occurs on the part of stronger departments in the region. **Some departments respond to up to 25% of their total calls in locations outside of their own jurisdictional borders.**
- By examining FPDs' responses within and outside their own districts, their budgetary resources, and the volume of calls they have historically handled, the CEC developed an understanding of which departments have high and low capacity to provide emergency response services.

### Alternatives

Utilizing this information, the CEC explored alternatives that would allow for service to be provided in a cost-effective manner throughout the region.

- The alternative of expanding the SFD force outwards into the region was deemed to be cost-prohibitive because of existing cost drivers within the SFD. While the SFD provides excellent service, it is relatively costly compared to rural service by volunteer FPDs. The CEC did not find it within its mission to conduct a full review of these costs, but notes that it may be beneficial.
- Alternatives therefore explore options related to increasing volunteerism, responsiveness, and capacity in rural departments.
- This recommendation builds on the CEC's work related to pass-through Fire Protection Districts, eight out of nine of which currently provide revenues to the SFD for coverage. The CEC recommended that these districts either consolidate or reconsider contracts with SFD in favor of contracting with neighboring volunteer FPDs.
- Local volunteer FPDs could increase their revenue base by:
  - Combining with neighboring jurisdictions in order to reflect existing service patterns;
  - Levying for Foreign Fire Insurance Funds if they are not already doing so, per another early CEC recommendation; and
  - Contracting with existing pass-through FPDs.
- **With these revenues influxes, FPDs could provide incentives for volunteers in order to improve their responsiveness in rural areas.** Some incentive options include: paying some members of a blended force, subsidizing training, developing an on-call arrangement, or exploring other options for bolstering responsiveness by having responders available at the fire house to respond to calls. Improved personnel management should assist FPDs in cultivating a pool of volunteers needed to respond to calls in a timely fashion.

### **Recommendation Feasibility & FPD Capacity**

The CEC preliminarily explored potential arrangements for combining select departments along existing jurisdictional lines in order to increase the overall revenue base from which the departments can provide volunteer incentives.

- The CEC's proposed arrangement includes four higher-capacity combined rural fire protection districts in addition to the SFD coverage of the urban area, and suggests that some fire houses may not be needed. New models should consider especially the trend toward medical emergency calls.
- Ultimately, however, local fire departments should consider the available data and work carefully to develop solutions that meet local response needs. Local departments should also consider the impact on ISO classifications before acting to implement any changes.
- Reallocations of revenue are intended to allow for better service in the region as a whole, but may require re-examination of cost drivers for the city of Springfield's Fire Department.

**In light of the research presented in its recommendation document, the CEC recommends that fire protection districts and departments in the region pursue consolidation and resource reallocation toward the creation of four districts, each with one to two Fire/EMS stations, with response times strengthened through a stipend or on-call arrangement.**

**The CEC further recommends that the City of Springfield engage in a comprehensive program review in order to address budgetary needs resulting from the potential reallocations and explore cost drivers described throughout this recommendation.**

**If necessary, the CEC recommends that a targeted action team be created for the purpose of pursuing and coordinating these efforts.**